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THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN XXIII

LET US LIVE IN THE TRUTH

Vatican City December 22, 1960

Following is the complete text of an English translation made available by the Vatican of the Christmas address given by His Holiness Pope John XXIII on Thursday, December 22, 1960. The Pope's message contains a call to all to live in the truth. He stressed the "four-fold duty of thinking, honoring, saying and doing what is true." (Radio, N.C.W.C. News Service)

We saw His glory, the glory as it were of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1, 14).

Venerable brethren and dear children throughout the whole world: Peace and the apostolic blessing.

The Gospel Prologue of St. John

May your acceptance of the greeting for a happy Christmas reciprocate what We are offering you of the feast.

It is the inspiration of the first page of St. John's Gospel, of that prologue which gives the theme to the sublime poem which hymns the mystery and the reality of the intimate and sacred union between the world of God and the sons of men, between heaven and earth, between the order of nature and that of grace; it shines forth and transforms itself into a spiritual triumph from the beginning of the world until its final dissolution.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him. In Him was life, and life was the light of men, and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1,1; 1, 4-5). There was a man called John, to bear witness to the light; he was not the light but only a witness who invited men to accept the light. The word of God by an ineffable stroke of divine condescension assumed human nature and took up His abode on earth among men and held familiar converse with them.

All who recognized Him, and in Him received the word of God made man—let us pronounce His holy and blessed name: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Mary—were united in the divine sonship itself: "He gave them power to be made sons of God" (John 1, 12). They were therefore considered as His brethren, set apart with eternity as their inheritance.

It is with this simple and basic reminder of doctrine and history that the announcement of Christmas and of Bethlehem comes to us. Sacred are these words which in lovely symphony re-echo in this place and in that, diffusing at once sweetness and beauty, later to break out together in the grand sweep of that magnificent composition which is the triple poem of the creation, of the Redemption at the price of Christ's Blood, and of the Church: one, holy, catholic, apostolic. Everything, that is, offered to the divine teaching and to the perfecting of life here below, for individuals and for nations that know how to profit by it.

First, then, is the splendor of the Heavenly Father, glorified in His Son, who draws us towards the indescribable wonder of the relations existing between the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. Then the second John, the Evangelist, hastens to tell us of the thoughts of the same Trinity for the benefit of man and of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, and of individual souls.

"We have seen His glory—grace and truth." It is on these words that the prologue ends; at that point also taking the note of glorious acclamation: "We have seen His glory."

What glory? That most exalted glory of the Word, who was "in the beginning and before all ages," and by making Himself man, being the Only-Begotten of the Father, appeared "full of grace and truth." Note well those two words grace and truth.

Grace

The word "grace" is the first that issued from the angel's lips as he anounced to Mary the divine mystery;

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and it is grace in its fullness, "hail full of grace." It is later repeated in various forms in Holy Writ and always it is an expression of kindness and goodness.

"How abundant are Thy mercies, O Lord," sings the psalmist with the note of tenderness that fills the heart with emotions—"Beneath the covert of Thy wings the children of men shall put their trust; they are inebriated with the plenty of Thy house, and the torrent of Thy pleasures quenches their thirst. For with Thee is the fountain of life, and in Thy light we shall see light. Extend O Lord Thy grace to those who acknowledge Thee and grant Thy justice to the right of heart" (Ps. 35, 8-11).

What happiness, what goodness, what a delight it would be to Us to speak to you of this grace!

Truth

But We have to admit to you, dear children, that it is especially with regard to truth that Our spirit feels itself uplifted, as life's pastoral experience provides ever more striking examples of what is of primary importance and a fitting subject of study.

St. Augustine, in giving a title to the Divine Word made visible at Bethlehem, names Him, without qualification, Truth, as the Only-Begotten of the Father, resplendent in the riches of His nature for the enlightenment of every creature, visible and invisible, material and spiritual, human and supernatural (Cf. De Trinitate 15, 11: P. L. 42,071).

The two Testaments contain the declaration of a doctrine which has its roots in the essence and splendor of truth, which shines forth from all ages, and is revealed to man, considered as the masterpiece and the priest of the visible universe, just as if it is a substance alive with a doctrine which extends beyond the developments of the twofold order, natural and supernatural.

The first words of the Old Testament describe indeed the origin of the world; the concluding words of the New Testament, "come Lord Jesus," are the summing up of history, law and grace.

For souls created by God and reserved for eternal destinies, the search for and the discovery of truth is natural; for truth is the immediate object of the inner activity of the human spirit.

Why is it called truth? Because it is a communication of God; and between man and truth there is no merely accidental relationship, but one which is necessary and of his essence.

Truth In Man And In The Christian

This truth, which is an outpouring of the Divine Word, shed light on the past, and with its rays clarifies the present. It is like the breath which gives assurance of life to come beyond the final appearance of God for the Last Judgment here below, which will decide the lot of each one for eternity.

The enlightening, the quickening, the making alive, considered in the physical world, but even more so in the spiritual, acknowledged and established deep within the life of man, whose features have something of the divine characteristics—"The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us" (Ps. 4, 7)—is a source of joy for every soul. "Thou hast given gladness to my heart" (Ibid.).

But what it is more important to arouse and retain is that, from man's side, the attitude towards the recognition of truth inspires a sacred and very serious responsibility to cooperate with the plan of the Creator, Redeemer and Glorifier. And this must be said all the more of the Christian who, by means of the graces of the sacraments, clearly bears the sign of his belonging to the family of God. Here exists and abides the dignity and the greatest responsibility which has been placed on man. It is to be said in the fullest possible sense to every Christian. It is to pay honor to the Son of God, the Word made Flesh, who gives life to all humanity and the whole social order.

Our Lord offered for men's imitation 30 years of silence so that they would learn to contemplate the truth in Him; and three years of unremitting and persuasive teaching so that they would grasp its example and life's purpose.

The Divine Book is sufficient to fill us with this teaching and to uplift us.

Union with Christ, Lord and Teacher—as He proclaimed Himself—is therefore the triumph of truth, the highest knowledge, the most perfect teaching.

John the Evangelist spoke of Him as the Divine Word raised aloft in the light of the two Testaments: "The law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1, 17). On another occasion the Divine Teacher repeated: "I am the light of the world, he that followeth me walketh not in darkness" (John 8, 12).

Dear children, what is this light if it is not truth? In the books of the Old Testament the reference to truth is common. The psalmist repeats so many times this invocation of truth: "Thy mercy and truth, O Lord, ever support me" (Ps. 39, 12). Truth and justice ever were and remain about Thee. Thy truth protects me as a shield. Thy justice, Thy justice forever; O Lord, truth abides forever. Truth will turn out (to be) of advantage to all who know how to make use of it. All the ways of the Lord are truth. The Lord loves truth, grace and glory (Cf. Ps. 83, 12).

The Eighth Commandment

In this light how attractive is the invitation to man to speak always the truth with his neighbor, and how stern and terrible the commandment never to utter falsehood against one's neighbor: "Thou shalt not bear false testimony against thy neighbor" (Ex. 20, 16) and to judge with truth and with a mind of peace at your gates: "Speak ye truth everyone to his neighbor: judge ye truth and judgment of peace in your gates" (Zach. 8, 16).

St. Peter Canisius, doctor of the Church, in his famous "Summa Doctrinae Christianae," which was the catechism of whole generations, expressed the negative and the positive parts of this Commandment with penetrating and convincing words.

For the negative part? Every false and deceiving witness is forbidden in which there can be some risk in a judicial decision, and even outside formal judgment, in which the good name of the neighbor can in any way become less by whisperers, detractors, malicious speakers, accusers and flatterers. Forbidden is every lie and every abuse of the tongue against the neighbor, and that in the same measure and in the same tone as in the three preceding commandments, namely, not to kill, not to commit adultery and not to steal.

For the positive part, on the other hand, honor is given to speaking well and graciously of one's neighbor, in defense of and to his advantage; without deceit, without pretense, without trickery.

The teaching is all derived from the Old Testament which is very rich in passages on this point of truth at the service of innocence, justice and charity.

And in the New Testament—the Gospel and the apostolic writings—what teaching on the substance, on the lofty wisdom of truth, understood and lived, and of God's Commandment!

By a glance at the passage in the Gospel of St. John, there is revealed the interesting encounter of Christ with those whom He had succeeded but recently in converting: "If you continue in my word, you will be my disciples indeed; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8, 30-32).

But that conversation, from being interesting, becomes terrible when Christ leads His questioners to conclusions discouraging for every one who denies the known truth.

"You claim to be children of Abraham. Do the works of Abraham then. On the other hand, I know that you intend to kill me, a man who has given you the truth, the truth that I know from God Himself. If God were your Father, you would love me also, because I too come from God who has sent me. But you are children of the Devil, and you wish to carry out the designs of him who is your father."

On hearing these words, St. John says, the unfortunate creatures took up stones to cast at Christ. But He hid Himself and went out of the temple. (Cf. John 8, 39-59). So was verified what was written in the psalm: "Love the Lord all ye His saints, for the Lord will require truth and He will repay abundantly all those who act proudly" (Ps. 30, 24). As it is said in the Book of Proverbs: "Buy truth and sell not wisdom" (Cf. Prov. 23, 23). Further on: "A deceitful tongue loves not truth" (Ibid. 26, 28). And yet again: "He who in giving judgment is an acceptor of persons . . . such a one for a morsel of bread will betray the truth" (Ibid. 28, 21).

Think, Honor, Say And Do What Is True

Here, then, is the man, the believer, faced with truth which imposes itself with sweetness and firmness.

Indeed the words of Christ place every man face to face with his responsibility, namely to accept or to reject the truth by inviting each one with persuasive force to abide by the truth, to nourish his own truthful thoughts and to act in accordance with the truth.

This message of greeting which We long to give you is above all a solemn call to live it, in accordance with the fourfold duty of thinking, honoring, saying and doing what is true. Such a duty issues forth in a clear and unconvertible manner from the words of the Bible which We have recalled to mind, from the harmony, full of sweetness and at the same time strict conformity, of the Old and New Testaments.

Above all, then, think what is true: have clear ideas on the great divine and human realities, of the Redemption, of the Church, of morals and of law, of philosophy and of art. Have the right ideas, or seek to form them for yourself conscientiously and with a right intention.

Unfortunately, there is becoming usual, almost of daily occurrence, a disconcerting casualness in reference to or in discussion of arguments, in a form that denotes the lack of preparation—to say the least about it—of those who take these tasks upon themselves. For this reason, in one of Our recent discourses aimed at safeguarding the institution of the family, We have invited "all, who have the will and the means, to exercise an influence on public opinion so that their intervention may always be on the side of clarifying, not of the confusing of ideas; in favor of right and respect" (Message to the Sacred Roman Rota, Oct. 25, 1960. Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 52, p. 901).

Honor what is true: It is an invitation to be a radiant example in all spheres of life—individual, family, professional, social. Truth makes us free (Cf. John, 8, 32). It ennobles whoever professes it openly and without human respect. Why, then, fear to honor it and make it respected? Why descend to making pacts with one's conscience by accepting compromises out of harmony with Christian life and practice when, on the contrary, he who has the truth ought to be convinced that he has within himself the light which dispels all darkness, the penetrating force which can transform the world? Not alone in guilt is he who deliberately obscures the truth, but just as guilty is he who, from fear of not seeming complete and up to date, betrays it by the ambiguity of his attitude.

Honor the truth, then, with the firmness, the courage and the knowledge of one who has strong convictions.

In addition, say what is true. Is not the mother's admonition to her baby to keep from lying the first school of truth, which from habit and custom learned from earliest years, becomes second nature, and prepares the truly honest man, the perfect Christian, with words ready and sincere, and whenever necessity demands it with the courage of a martyr and a confessor? This is the testimony which the God of truth asks of each one of His sons.

Finally, do what is true. It is a light in which every person ought to immerse himself, and which sets the tone for each single action of life. It is charity which obliges everyone to exercise the apostolate of truth, so as to spread knowledge of it, to defend its rights, to mould souls—particularly those of youth, which are open and generous—and to allow themselves to be impregnated with it to the deepest fibers of their being.

The Counter-Decalogue

Think, honor, say and do what is true. In the uttering of these basic demands of human and Christian life, a protest rises to the lips from the heart: Where on earth is respect for truth found? Are we not sometimes, and even very frequently, confronted with a "counter-decalogue," brazen and insolent, which cancels the "not"—the prefix, that is, of every clear and exact directive of the six of God's Commandments which follow "Honor thy father and thy mother?"

Is not the life that passes before our eyes, in practice, a deliberate exercise of contradictions—fifth, kill; sixth, commit adultery; seventh, steal; eighth, bear false witness —as if by a diabolical conspiracy against truth?

Yet there remains ever clear and valid the command of divine law declared to Moses on the mountain: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor" (Ex. 20, 16; Deut. 5, 20). This commandment—like the others—is alive with all its consequences, positive and negative: the duty to truth, to sincerity and to candor, which is the correspondence of the human mind with reality; and the sad possibility and—saddest of all—the fact of lying, of hypocrisy and of calumny which obscure the truth.

We happen to be living between two concepts of human ways of living together. On one side, the reality of the world examined, studied and reduced to practice in accordance with the design of God; on the other—We are not afraid to repeat it—the counterfeit of this same reality, made easy by technical skill and the ingenuity of man in recent times and right up to the present day.

Confronted by the fourfold ideal of thinking, honoring, saying and doing what is true, and the daily spectacle of the open or masked betrayal of this ideal, the heart fails to restrain its anguish. And Our own voice trembles.

In spite of everything and everyone, "the truth of the Lord abides forever" (Ps. 116, 2), and ever desires to shine more brightly before our eyes and be heard in our hearts. The feeling is rather generally accepted by some that, once again, the times through which the world is passing are momentous. But past history has known much worse. And notwithstanding the noisy or cunning voices of the more violent, let us be absolutely certain that the spiritual victory will be with Jesus Christ, "who hangs from a tree."

Unquiet Times

The ever more grave news of the storms which rage over some parts of the world, and threaten not only the social order, but more important, many souls which are weak and unstable rather than of ill will or wicked, moves us in this Christmas appeal to direct a word to those who have the highest responsibilities in the public and social sphere, and to invite them, in the name of Christ, to place their hand on their breast and act honorably in these days of general danger. In reality, there is matter of common interest; and every distinction between the great ones and the little in life should be resolved in a united effort in common.

We are glad, then, to raise Our priestly arms to those with the greatest responsibilities, who preside over the organization of the civil order—heads of state and of regional and civic administrations—and then to all without exception: educators, parents and teachers, to all who work with head or hand or heart; to those, and We emphasize this, who are responsible for public opinion, which is being formed or deformed by means of the press, radio and television, by the cinema, by meetings and exhibitions of every kind, literary or artistic—writers, artists, producers, directors, scenery designers.

To all Our children, and particularly to those called by some special mission to give testimony to the truth, as well as to all who aim at living their individual and family life in the holy light of Christian teaching, there are directed the thoughts which rise spontaneously in Our heart and which, We are sure, will be received with due consideration by men of honesty and sincerity.

No, dear children, never lend yourselves to any counterfeiting of truth. Have a horror of that.

Do not avail yourselves of these marvellous gifts of God, such as light and sound and color, and their applications in technical and artistic forms—printing, journalism, television—to distort man's natural inclination toward truth, on which is erected the edifice of His nobility and greatness. Do not avail yourselves of them to drive to ruin consciences as yet unformed or wavering.

Hold in holy terror the spreading of the germs that desecrate love, break up the family, mock religion and shake the foundations of the social order, which is based on both individual interests and a brotherhood that is harmonious and respectful of the rights of each person. Work together also to render ever more pure and less infected the air which is breathed, of which the first victims are always the innocent and the weak. Know how to build with quiet perseverance and untiring endeavor the conditions for better times, healthier, more just, more secure.

Dear children: We are once again drawn to the vision of Bethlehem, to the Light of the Word Incarnate, to His grace and truth, Who desires to win all to Himself.

Constant In Faith

The silence of that holy night and the contemplation of that scene of peace are most eloquent. Let us direct our steps to Bethlehem with innocent eyes and welcoming hearts.

It is from near this Word of God, made Man for us, near this "goodness and kindness of God our Saviour" that We have pleasure once again in looking with great respect and affection especially toward the highest representatives of public power, variously distributed over the diverse and most important points of the globe, and toward those responsible for the education of the growing generation and for public opinion, encouraging each one to take ever more timely thought of his own duties and his own responsibilities and to occupy his position with sincerity and courage.

We have confidence in God and in His light. We have confidence in men of good will, satisfied that Our words may rouse in the hearts of all upright men a note of manly generosity.

It sometimes happens that some faint voice, as if in a note of prophecy, reaches Our ear in a whisper of exaggerated fear which later excites weak fantasies.

St. Matthew, the first of the Evangelists, tells us that Jesus in the evening of a day of great labor retired to a mountain alone to pray. The ship of His disciples, remaining on the lake, was tossed about by the winds, and during the night Jesus came down softly to the waves and in a loud voice said: "Have confidence and fear not; for I am here."

"Lord, if it is Thou," said St. Peter, "bid me come to Thee upon the waters."

And Jesus said: "Come."

And Peter, going from the boat, hastened to approach his Divine Master. But the violence of the wind made him afraid and, beginning to sink, he cried out: "Lord save me!" Jesus immediately took him by the hand and drew him toward Himself and said: "Man of little faith, why didst thou doubt?"

And when all were reunited in the boat, the wind ceased (Cf. Matt. 14, 22-32).

Dear children, even on the night on the lake, this episode is one of enchanting clearness. The humble successor of St. Peter is not experiencing any temptation to dismay. We feel strong in faith and, in the company of Jesus Christ, We can cross not only the tiny lake of Galilee, but also all the seas of the world. Christ's word is enough for safety and for victory.

This is one of the most beautiful pages of the New Testament. It is encouraging and of good omen. After this vision, We desire to end Our Christmas message with a phrase of the Old Testament, and express the living substance of the conversation which renders so dear the opening of the heart of a father and a pastor to his spiritual children.

It is the end of the meeting between the holy King Ezechias and Isaias, the greatest prophet of Israel. The latter had alarmed the king with threats of an invasion in the near future and of great disasters. To this Ezechias replied: "The word of the Lord which you have reported to me is good; enough for me is peace and truth in my days" (Cf. Is. 39, 8).

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